

*Gratitude and Generosity*

*Epiphany IV*

*February 1, 2015*

Have you ever made a “gratitude list”? Some self-help books and even church leaders suggest making that type of list in order to change our attitude about life. You know, a lot of people go through life focused on what’s wrong. We harrumph about big and little things—from a bad haircut or a broken traffic light to whatever personal challenges we may face in life. A gratitude list can help us change that attitude and really the way we live in the world.

So as I was preparing for this sermon, the first in a series on generosity for our capital stewardship campaign over the next several weeks, I decided to try identifying the things for which I am grateful. Some items on the list come to me pretty easily—of course I am grateful for Lynn and our marriage. She is the love of my life and the one person more than any other who keeps me grounded and helps me to “keep it real.” Without Lynn, I would be even more of a pain in the neck than I am normally.

I am grateful for our children, Lauren, Will and Katherine (and their significant others). Lynn and I are so proud of each of our kids—not only that they are pursuing their dreams in their adult life; but that they live with integrity. They have each been a joy since birth—even during those typically difficult adolescent years that were hard on them and us, too.

There are more of the typical items on my gratitude list—I am grateful for having loving parents, Joe and Margaret, who were married for sixty-six years. They provided a stable home for me and helped to set me on a good path for life. I am grateful that I was born in the United States and for the freedoms we enjoy that have been defended and expanded by prior generations on the battlefield, in the courtroom, in the streets and in the schools, and in the market place of ideas and commerce. I am grateful I was born in this generation, with the advances we have in science, technology, medicine, psychology, and the law.

And I am grateful most of all for how God reveals God’s self to us in nature, in the story of God’s people as recorded in the Bible, and especially as God is revealed in Jesus Christ. That connection that God has made and continues to make through the Holy Spirit is what inspires me and so many to live gratefully. That approach to life is about much more than a self-help, positive attitude method. It is about God transforming individuals and communities so that they give thanks to God not only in their words but in their actions and especially in their love for one another and for all people.

Being grateful is one of the key characteristics of being a Christian. Especially in the Catholic and Episcopal tradition, we are a “Eucharistic people,” that is we are united in thanksgiving to God for all God has done for us in Christ. The Eucharist is our primary form of worship of Almighty God and the word literally means, “Great Thanksgiving.” Recognizing what God has done and continues to do and being thankful through our worship shapes us as people so that we see the world differently and live differently.

So if we go back to my gratitude list with this transformed attitude because of what God has done for us, the list will become geometrically longer. Here is a sample of how I saw the world through the lens of gratitude over the course of one evening last weekend:

Last Saturday, Lynn and I went out to dinner at Marlow’s Tavern. I am grateful because someone gave a gift card to me for Christmas. I am grateful because we had a cheery waitress who was attentive and made for a pleasant experience. I am grateful for fried whole okra. I am grateful for all the employees working to allow Lynn and me to have a good time. And of course I am grateful for being with Lynn. In that one, relatively small event, there is a whole network of people and activities joining together to sustain and brighten our world.

Later that evening, we watched a DVD at home and I again became grateful for all the people involved in putting together that work of art—from the original novelist, to the screenwriter, to all the performers and behind the scenes professionals. Just one simple movie has the fingerprints of hundreds of people and this is all offered to the world for entertainment and perhaps some insights to help us think and live differently.

I could go on, but I think you get the point. We live in a remarkable world. God has provided so much for us in nature; the example I often use is how I am grateful that I can move the fingers of my hand like this. That is remarkable and just one point of a long list of things to be grateful for in the created order of things. In addition, our fellow human beings have added so much value to the natural world through our creativity, hard work, and common effort to make beauty and utility for the benefit of so many. If we open our eyes and really see our world, natural and manmade, it is hard not to be grateful!

Now listening to my words, it could seem that I am just being “Pollyanna” —isn’t the world grand? A positive attitude may be helpful and even right on many levels. But doesn’t that attitude ignore so much about what is wrong with the world? Perhaps. If I did another exercise and listed everything for which I am not grateful, I imagine I could come up with another pretty long list. Some are big things, like hunger, disease, disasters, and so on. Some are little things, like mosquitoes and sunburn. And in my experience, it is just as easy to be formed by remembering all that’s wrong with the world and have that shape how we live.

There is a famous scene about how that works in C.S. Lewis’ novel, *The Great Divorce*. If you are not familiar with the book, it is basically about an imaginary daytrip that people living in

hell make to the outskirts of heaven in order to visit people they knew on earth—friends, relatives, co-workers, even enemies. If they like it there in heaven, they can stay.

One such guest comes on the scene and all she does is grumble about one thing or another about her prior life on earth, her current time in hell, and now even about her visit to heaven. One of her fellow visitors from hell comments to one of their heavenly hosts that she is just a poor, pitiable soul and that she doesn't belong in hell. Quoting Lewis now, "The wise older gentleman gave an interesting response, 'The question is whether she is a grumbler, or only a grumble.'"

Speaking about grumbling he said, "...it begins with a grumbling mood, and yourself still distinct from it: perhaps criticizing it. And yourself, in a dark hour, may will that mood, embrace it. (You) can repent and come out of it again. But there may come a day when you can do that no longer. Then there will be no *you* left to criticize the mood, nor even to enjoy it, but just the grumble itself going on forever like a machine." [1]

Gratitude and grumbling do shape us one way or the other; and what we decide and do now shapes how we will be in eternity. But if we do not want to be superficial and "Pollyanna," then what *do* we do when bad things happen? Do we have to grit our teeth and be grateful for bad things like the loss of our job, the loss of our health, even the loss of a love one? No, I don't think so. God does not expect us to be unreal or unfeeling. For example, as we read in the rubrics of the burial office in *The Book of Common Prayer*, "human grief (is not) unchristian" (p. 507). We are designed by God to feel a range of emotions, not to force an artificial response in order to meet an unrealistic expectation of how we should be. So what do we do?

Let me tell you a story from my experience. When I was admitted to the hospital in 2012, I was shocked. I mean, I had done all (well, most) of the right things—exercise, diet and so forth (I had even given up red meat that year!). When I was diagnosed with blood clots in my lungs, my first response was "How did this happen?" I was worried (more than I let on) as I put a brave face over my "negative" emotions. Could I say in that moment, "I am grateful"? No, not really. I could say sincerely, "God is good" and I did. But I was not grateful for this life threatening experience, no matter how I might rationalize it and try to put a positive spin on it.

But here is what did happen. Good, loving people prayed for me. They loved and supported Lynn and me. They brought me a prayer shawl and later brought us food. Doctors and nurses cared for me during and after my hospital stay. Clergy covered for me at church, even on Christmas Eve. People held Lynn and me together when Lynn and I had our pretty secure world ripped apart. And for that, I was and continue to be very grateful. That is my experience of how gratitude operates even in the midst of real pain and sorrow.

I imagine many of us can relate a similar story, when something bad happened to us, something that we are definitely not grateful for, a situation when the fabric of our lives has been ripped apart, and loving, faithful people came along side of us to hold our lives together. They did big and small things to encourage us, to meet our needs, and to be there for us without rushing us along to a positive attitude. People who stand by us when we are hurting are the people for whom I am so grateful.

*The Book of Common Prayer* says it this way in one of the most beautiful prayers in our tradition:

“Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work, or watch, or weep this night, and give your angels charge over those who sleep. Tend the sick, Lord Christ; give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, shield the joyous; and all for your love's sake. *Amen.*”

That prayer for Christ’s presence is embodied in the lives of men and women in the church, including Episcopal Church of the Holy Spirit. Being a community of faith for which we can be grateful is proven not only when things are going well, but when things are going poorly. We can be grateful for those people who visit and care for us when we are down. That is how Christ continues his ministry in our world today.

That is why I am grateful to be your priest and to be part of this community. You cheer me up when I am discouraged and when I am tempted to become a grumbler. You help me in so many ways to do the work of ministry described in that beautiful prayer. In big and small ways I have much to give thanks for. And you know what—you all have much to be grateful for, too. During these weeks ahead of us, I plan to start my day being grateful to God for what God has done and continues to do for us. I hope you will join me in that gratitude.

To help begin that process, I would like you to take time before our prayers and complete the gratitude cards that will be passed out to you now. After you complete it, please put them in the designated baskets as you come up for Holy Communion. Thank you—and thanks be to God.

[1] Lewis, C.S., *The Great Divorce*, (New York, New York: HarperOne, 1973), 77.